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## **Script development: Defining the field**

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### **Abstract**

Through an extensive survey of the field, this article asks, what is script development? How is it defined in industry discourse and in screenwriting scholarship? While definitions of script development can be found across the spectrum of screenwriting and screen production resources, ranging from the instructional guidelines offered by funding bodies to references in the how-to market, the article posits that academic scholarship on the practice is still emerging. As such, this article seeks to establish a platform from which we can both define and conceive of further research into script development – however it might be named, practiced and studied – possibly as a sub-discipline of screenwriting studies and/or central to the study of screenwriting practice. The article brings together extant definitions and documented experiences of script development, to offer a basis from which to discuss both academic and practice-based approaches to the phenomenon. While not suggesting that the practice of script development should be standardized or limited by definition, the article does argue for the importance of investigating the available definitions and identifying the gaps in literature. By seeking out the various angles and overlaps of those researching in this field, the article proposes to begin a conversation and invite further research around what script development is and looks like in various international contexts.

### **Keywords**

script development

screenwriting

screen industry

screenwriting practice

screenwriting research

literature review

## **Introduction**

We begin this article – indeed, the special issue – by asking the question, what is script development? While on the face of it this may appear to generate an obvious response, the reality is that script development is complex, contested and contingent upon context. It means different things to different people at different times, and as will be revealed through the article, is viewed sometimes from the perspective of what it does (e.g. a set of processes), and sometimes from a position of deficit (e.g. what it does not do, but that it could do). A social, cultural and creative practice ‘in which ideas, emotions and personalities combine with the practicalities, policies and movements of the industry to create, refine and tell a story in the best way possible and under the circumstances at the time’ (Kerrigan and Batty 2016: 3), script development ‘ranges from readers’ reports on drafts and competition entries at the emerging/aspiring end of the market, to intensive face-to-face workshopping with ‘script development personnel on commissioned work’ (Kerrigan and Batty 2016: 7).

Some definitions of script development can be found across the spectrum of screenwriting and screen production resources, ranging from the instructional guidelines offered by funding bodies, to references (albeit often fleeting) in the how-to market, yet academic scholarship on the practice is still emerging. There are some

extant studies of script development, whether framed as such specifically or evident by the content, spanning a range of disciplines and discourses. These include screen industry practice (Joyce 2003; Munt 2008; Bloore 2012; Lyle 2015; Taylor 2015b); creative writing (Taylor and Batty 2015); creative practice research (Batty 2016); and media and cultural studies (Conor 2013; Macdonald 2013; O'Connell 2014; Taylor 2014, 2015a; Wreyford 2016). But do these studies speak to each other, and is there a common understanding of script development? What this article seeks to achieve by bringing these guides, studies and definitions together – embracing their diversity of content and voice – is to create a platform from which we might define and conceive of further research into script development. Whether this emerges as a sub-discipline of screenwriting studies, and/or a central way of understanding and ‘doing’ screenwriting practice studies, the intention is to draw together a rich body of discourse that draws attention to both its overlaps and gaps, and provide a ‘roadmap’ of where script development studies might go.

Arguably for the first time then, this article provides a scholarly platform from which to discuss script development in and for both academic and practice-based contexts. Important to this is a range of ideas and definitions available from industry-based literature, from which both intersecting and contradictory notions of script development can be uncovered and discussed, to begin to identify the many and varied practices, understandings and imperatives that exist across different media and cultures.

### **How is script development being defined?**

Script development is a term used widely in industry practice, yet in scholarly and industry literature there would appear to be only a few attempts to define it. There are

many legitimate reasons why this should be so, among them the fact that there are many and varied practices, understandings and imperatives, over just as many different media, cultures and contexts. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin with the definitions that are available in an attempt to make some initial inroads.

We start by looking to simple and straight-forward definitions such as the one Pamela Douglas provides in the glossary to her book, *Writing the TV Drama Series: How to Succeed as a Professional Writer in TV*. Douglas defines script development as ‘The process of bringing a project from concept to production; also the period when a writer works with producers to refine a script through all revision steps’ (2005: 228). Lucy Scher, in her book *Reading Screenplays: How to Analyse and Evaluate Film Scripts*, defines development as

[...] the process by which the developer works with a writer on a project with the intention of making the script better placed for the next stage, i.e. finding a producer, seeking an agent, making an application for funding, or production of the film itself. (2011: 131)

Peter Bloore, whose hybrid industry-academic book *The Screenplay Business: Managing Creativity and Script Development in the Film Industry* may well be the only full publication available dedicated solely to the practice of script development, offers perhaps an expanded definition (as it relates to independent film production):

Screenplay development is the creative and industrial collaborative process in which a story idea (either an original idea or an adaptation of an existing idea, such as a play, novel, or real life event) is turned into a script; and is then

repeatedly rewritten to reach a stage when it is attractive to a suitable director, actors and relevant film production funders; so that enough money can be raised to get the film made. (Bloore 2012: 9)

Stephen Cleary, also speaking of film production, and in his capacity as a respected script and story development consultant, offered this definition as part of his 2013 lecture series in Melbourne, Australia:

[...] a professional collaboration between myself and the rest of the creative team whereby we evolve a dramatically satisfying story through a process of scripting, packaging and financing, which allows the film to be made in a way that is true to our vision, which makes sense in the economic and cultural context of our industry and which, above all, enables the film to reach the audience we have identified for our story. The success of this process will feed into further projects in terms of experience, contacts and finance. (Cleary 2013)

What all of these definitions have in common is the element of *collaboration* and, particularly in the case of the latter two, a focus on the industry realities of attracting finance, talent and distribution. From a scholarly perspective, it would be useful to take these definitions and expand them to take into account other practices – away from immediate commercial imperatives – that might also be called ‘script development’.

For example, might an individual screenwriter’s practice of developing an idea into a draft script – and a draft through further revisions – be understood as script

development? At this stage of her/his practice there might be no collaboration, but knowledge about their processes (e.g. practice-led research) for developing the screen idea (see Macdonald 2013) could be useful, especially for other practitioners. Similarly, how might we understand and value the practices of writers creating screenplays to be read or performed as creative works in and of themselves, without the expectation of them becoming screen works? How far do we take definitions of script development in respect to very specific industry practices? We might consider, for example, the highly regulated process of developing storylines into shooting scripts for long-running television series, according to a previously drafted forward planning document created in accordance with a series bible. Are periods of script development discrete or ongoing in such contexts? Do our definitions of script development also extend to the rapid turnaround of rewriting scripts according to the demands of production and changing circumstances (e.g. ill actors, unavailable locations and sensitivity to world events)?

Another area from which we might construct a working definition of script development is industry journalism. Barbara Schock's article 'Intelligent screenplay development', written for *Filmmaker Magazine*, offers this opinion from the point of view of the Hollywood studio system:

Development is a dirty word in the film business. To screenwriters in Hollywood, it means toiling under the tutelage of a team of business people, endeavoring to give them what they want, all the while realizing that there is little chance that their script will ever get made. To development executives, it means finding an idea, novel, or original screenplay and then having to work with a writer who can be alternately moody, recalcitrant, or even lazy – and

then being disappointed with the results. For the studio executive, development is a necessary evil in order to stay ahead in the idea-production factory game of Hollywood. (Schock 1995)

Although this defining statement is not strictly analytical, rather expressing a specific point-of-view, it is notable in its efforts to define development from the different perspectives of those who experience it on a daily basis. Paul Lucey similarly offers an insight from this viewpoint when he asks:

During review, readers and development executives ask the same questions you probably would, if you were in their shoes: Does the script present interesting characters who are caught up in a good story? Does the story say anything philosophically? Was the script a page-turner? Did it stir the reader's emotions? (1996: 325)

Schock's article goes on to lament that Hollywood's 'obsession with the mechanics of plot and action have to do with a desire to devise a formula for screenplays so they can imitate and repeat prior box office successes' (1995). This raises an interesting question in the pursuit of definitions, which is about what development actually entails: which aspects of screenwriting craft beyond plot are used in/by/for script development, and what tools are used to achieve this? As Craig Batty writes of the value of theme in creating a screenplay, 'Although plot-focussed questions are clearly relevant to script development, as an initial preoccupation I believe they take the writer *out* of the project rather than *into* it' (2013: 4).



For further input into an expanded definition, we can also look to Ian W. Macdonald's aforementioned concept of the 'screen idea', which he defines as:

Any notion held by one or more people of a singular concept (however complex), which may have conventional shape or not, intended to become a screenwork, whether or not it is possible to describe it in written form or by other means. (2013: 4–5)

Here we read the screen idea as a premise, a theme, or even a story world: elements that anchor the intended screenwork and drive its narrative shape, rather than using a pre-conceived plot or story structure as the basis of development. On this, Batty suggests that a focus on theme can be used to cohere a creative (development) team, writing that 'if a screenplay is simplified from the outset by considering its thematic core, a stable platform is created from which a more complex and original execution can later be developed' (2013: 6).

Interviewed by Linda Seger for her book *When Women Call the Shots: The Developing Power and Influence of Women in Television and Film* (1996), television creator Beth Sullivan discusses how a shared idea of aims and outcomes can influence the way stories develop:

My objective is to challenge not just the emotions, but the mind. In fact, I coined a motto for the writing staff to follow: 'In through the heart and out through the brain.' That's our guiding force in terms of what premises drive our stories, (1996: 230)

These notions of *unity in collaboration* might be considered alongside guidelines such as this one from Linda Aronson, for script development in television: ‘Before any kind of creative development begins, it is essential that producer and head writer are completely sure of the following: precisely what sort of series is intended, considering all creative and budgetary options and the proposed demographic’ (2000: 27). As Cleary affirms: ‘There is no good development without exploring the relationship between the story and the motives the individuals involved have for telling the story’ (2013). Screen Australia’s guidelines for submitting ‘Script Development Notes from the Writer’ similarly suggest identifying ‘the big ideas at the heart of the project’ (2014: 1). Related, yet additional, to these perceptions of what *drives* script development are notions of what needs to be *brought to* script development, at least from the screenwriter, such as ‘a robust understanding of the film’s genre, premise and structure’ (2014: 1). Scher states that writing *skill* is a priority, at least in the first instance: ‘Reading screenplays requires the skills to analyse the ability of the writer, first, to tell a story, and, second, to tell that story dramatically’ (2011: 11).

Within all of these definitions, guidelines and pre-requisites, one aspect that is inferred but missing is that of the *relationships* that occur when collaborating with others in/through script development. Cleary (2013) talks about ‘good development’, which assumes an experience that is contingent on exchanges between people (and processes), and it is interesting to consider this in relation to Díóg O’Connell’s chapter about the policies of the Irish Film Board (IFB). She asks: ‘can it be suggested that the IFB’s approach to script development focuses on nurturing the screenwriter’s career, or instead emphasizes the process of writing a screenplay and narrative development?’ (2014: 113). If the collaborative nature of script development is necessarily assisted by social capital and ‘social relations that generate productive

benefits' (O'Connell 2014: 115), the question arises, just how broad can a fully inclusive definition of script development be?

### **What does script development look (and feel) like?**

In considering this question, we might first think about what script development *looked* like, and how it *was* experienced, historically. Cleary recalls a time when the 'development methodology was determined by the filmmaker: you developed according to how the filmmaker wanted [development] to happen'; in contemporary practice, however, 'it's the other way around. The methodology determines how we develop' (Cleary 2013). Bridget Conor charts a course through early Hollywood in her book chapter, 'Hired Hands, Liars, Schmucks: Histories of Screenwriting Work and Workers in Contemporary Screen Production'. This examination of screenwriting practices (and labour) considers the origins of script development methodologies and their impact on contemporary practices. As Conor notes,

As well as screenwriting histories illuminating the longitudinal effects of bad cultural work, this case study also highlights some of the ways in which today's screenwriters can be understood to be speaking back to a collective history of their profession. (2013: 44)

Cleary reminds us that the dominant structures influencing script development are forty years old and were designed for mass production via the Hollywood studio system. He suggests that domestic markets (i.e. beyond the United States) might benefit from 're-examining and recasting ideas we've previously just consumed and regurgitated' (Cleary 2013). This call-to-action of sorts could be repurposed as a

starting point for a rationale behind a scholarly investigation into contemporary (and international) script development practices, especially when considered in the context of entrenched and even dated notions around the script development process that can exacerbate broader social inequalities (of gender, ethnicity or sexuality, for example). As Felicia D. Henderson states of her experience in television writing rooms in the United States, it is important for ‘the creative industry to consider itself critically’ (cited in Caldwell 2009: 225).

Thinking about what script development looks like and how it is experienced *now*, we can look to the many collections of published interviews with screenwriters (e.g. the aforementioned Seger 1996; as well as McCreadie 2006; Conor 2013; Taylor and Batty 2015) that speak to their screenwriting practice – which by association also speak to their practices of script development. When interviewed in 2009, story consultant and script ‘guru’ Christopher Vogler gave this statement about his work in the Hollywood studio context. His observation could easily be prefaced with, ‘You know you are in development when [...]’:

They’ve got some funding in place already, they’ve spent money for the right to develop the script, they’ve paid the writer and a producer to run the operation of developing the script, they may even have started casting if they are optimistic about it. (cited in Taylor and Batty 2015)

Schock paints a similar and more comprehensive – if considerably bleaker – picture, describing what she calls ‘A typical Hollywood development scenario’ (1995). Written as a hypothetical anecdote, we believe the quotation, albeit lengthy, is worth repeating in its entirety as a potentially familiar *experience* of script development:

a producer gets enthusiastic about an idea, sells it to a powerful studio executive, and lands a deal. A high-priced writer is contracted to write the standard two drafts and a polish. The first draft comes in and, in most cases, the producer is disappointed. Something's wrong – it just doesn't sing off the page. The producer, his or her development person, and the studio executive prepare critical notes for the writer which are usually inadequate to help the writer make the changes that they feel are necessary. The writer makes a second pass, but sensing their lack of enthusiasm, has difficulty mustering feeling for the rewrite. When the second draft comes in, it's still not that home run the producer was looking for. The project is dropped, or, depending on how commercial the producer believes the idea is, another writer is brought in. (Schock 1995)

Beyond the Hollywood experience, Susan Liddy's book chapter on the practices of debut feature film screenwriters from Ireland is drawn from primary interviews, and thus provides practitioner-specific script development perspectives from points of view of those who did and did not receive government funding, and those who did and did not direct their own screenplays (2014: 130–49). The aforementioned chapter by O'Connell also looks at development from the perspective of the Irish Film Board, identifying its role in the industry and, using the results of a questionnaire, assessing its relationship with writers (2014: 113–29).

Scholarly works discussing screenwriting practice more generally also provide insights into what script development looks and feels like. For example, in his chapter 'Based on a True Story: Negotiating Collaboration, Compromise and Authorship in

the Script Development Process’, writer Alec McAulay (2014) proposes there is an illusion around the perception of script development, whereby its linearity is assumed. Drawing on his experience of developing a short film script with a director, McAulay discusses the way in which the drafts changed both incrementally and radically, concluding it was difficult, if not impossible, to unequivocally track whose ideas were in the script that was produced, and also how the final script was arrived at. He thus challenges common sense notions of script development, which assume that the screenplay will always be more effectively realized at the end of the production process than earlier in its formation. As he puts it:

Received wisdom on the script-to-screen process infers that it is one of continual improvement and enhancement [...] And yet it stands to reason that the script-to-screen process does not always work effectively; that, theoretically at least, the ideal film is not always the one projected on screen, and that the best film achievable may in fact have been Draft 5 of a script that progressed in diminishing quality from that point on for another six drafts due to some misfire in the collaborative process. (2014: 190)

This notion problematizes some of the earlier definitions of script development, which while not worded in such a way as to claim a cumulative effect of ‘improvement’, do imply a smooth and forward-moving process whereby a script is ‘repeatedly rewritten to reach a stage when it is attractive’ (Bloore 2012: 9), or ‘a dramatically satisfying story [is evolved] through a process of scripting’ (Cleary 2013). Considering the linearity of script development might thus contribute to how we define the practice.

McAulay's chapter also contributes to these discussions of how script development is *experienced*, as do other reflective accounts of screenwriting practice. Jill Nelmes' journal article, 'Developing the screenplay *Wingwalking*: An analysis of the writing and rewriting process', for example, explores and analyses the different stages of her own screenwriting practice (2008). Rather than taking a 'how-to' approach, the article examines the decisions she made and the effects they had on the eventual screenplay, which can be considered both a separate exercise in itself, and a part of a film production process, imagined or otherwise.

Other reflective accounts of individual script development practices can be found in Ph.D. theses, which often focus in depth on one aspect of the writing process. Examples include Helen Jacey on the heroine's journey (2010), Larissa Sexton-Finck on female subjectivity and agency in contemporary cinema and independent script writing practice (2009), Matthew Hawkins on drafting (2013), Stayci Taylor on comedy and gender (2016), Louise Sawtell on gender and the musical (2017) and Simon Weaving on genre (2014). As well as the doctoral studies themselves is scholarship on the research potential inherent in developing screenplays within the academy, such as Batty et al. (2015) and Lee et al. (2016). Studies such as these, specifically focused on one experience of script development – usually individual and always within the singular environment of the academy – might direct us towards research into *new practices* of script development, following an examination of *existing* practices as would be expected of a Ph.D. (i.e. a review of extant ideas leading to a new contribution).

In thinking about what script development 'looks like', we might turn again to Macdonald's concept of the screen idea. He proposes that the collaborators working with a screen idea be considered the 'Screen Idea Working Group' (SIWG), which

‘for any screen development, functions according to how both the power held and the control wielded by specific participants work against the extent to which parties are willing to collaborate and extend trust to each other’ (Macdonald 2013: 77). While acknowledging that the screen idea needs to be shaped into a narrative that suits the investors in these working groups (echoing previous links to finance and development), Macdonald’s collaborative model is perhaps more inclusive of different ways to consider development teams.

This can be thought about in the context of Australian film, where according to Lisa French’s chapter, ‘A “Team” approach: Sue Brooks, Sue Maslin and Alison Tilson’ (2003), funding bodies have focused on teams and having the pivotal roles of writer, producer and director in place before committing to develop projects. French documents how, when in 1992 Brooks, Maslin and Tilson formed the production company Gecko, their coming together provided an equal balance between producer, director and writer, working collaboratively from the start to create the ‘same picture’ (from, we might say, the screen idea). Although credited for their distinct individual roles, Brooks, Maslin and Tilson see themselves as filmmakers working across boundaries, all contributing to the development process.

The ‘how-to’ market is another possible site of investigation into what script development looks like, namely in terms of how – if at all (see Price, this issue) – these manuals might reflect and/or shape industry practices. While some are sceptical of the value of manuals, many of them are written by people with industry experience – as writers, producers, script editors and script consultants – though it is true that few of these manuals relate their discourse explicitly to the ‘reality’ of how the industry operates, supported by evidence. Regardless of how one might perceive their value – academically or otherwise – by definition the hundreds of screenwriting guides are all



relevant to script development because they all describe/prescribe processes by which a writer can develop a screenplay. However, relatively few refer explicitly to script development, particularly as it pertains to actual and current industry practice.

Exceptions include Aronson's *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Screenplay: A Comprehensive Guide to Writing Tomorrow's Films* (2010), which makes frequent references to 'development' in relation to her 25 'development strategies'. Like many, Aronson's guide essentially offers a system through which a writer can take their screenplay through a development process that suits their own, 'isolated' practice (see, again, Price, this issue). Conversely, this is a strategy that Tim Ferguson's *The Cheeky Monkey: Writing Narrative Comedy* (2010) advises against: 'It's possible for a six-part half-hour series to be fully developed by a single writer, but the show's dialogue can become repetitive, the stories similar and the characters start to deal with familiar problems in the same old ways' (2010: 201). Aronson is far from unaware of the collaborative aspects of development, having published about it elsewhere (see Aronson 2000, for one example) and frequently leading industry seminars and training workshops for broadcasters such as the BBC. The more fundamental question here is, how do these guides shape our understanding of development? Like many manuals, Aronson's work contributes to what we might call *the language of script development*, offering as it does definitions of well-known concepts that assist writers' practices, such as 'turning points', 'action lines' and 'relationship lines'. But does this language intersect with that of industry and, by association, development and funding policy?

### **The 'language' of script development**

The language of development has a clear relationship with the language of screenwriting, which takes us back to a question posed above: which aspects of screenwriting craft are used in/by/for script development, and which ‘tools’ are being espoused to achieve this? For example, Screen Australia’s guidelines for submitting ‘Script development notes from the writer’ – a requirement for funding – makes frequent mention of the terms ‘genre’, ‘premise’ ‘structure’ ‘stakes’ and ‘key turning points’ (Screen Australia 2014). In this regard, it could be interesting for researchers to note those who are challenging, or at least extending, the language of screenwriting and/or script development. Firmly entrenched in the language of script development is the notion of *giving and taking notes* on scripts – a process that for some might be the only experience of ‘script development’. Vicki Peterson and Barbara Nicolosi have published a book devoted entirely to this process: *Notes to Screenwriters: Advancing Your Story, Screenplay, and Career with Whatever Hollywood Throws at You* (2015). Speaking to those in development roles, they start the book with their own note:

If you are a producer, development executive, educator, or investor, start by reading the first section of this book, on the notes experience for writers. Try and put yourself in the shoes of the writers on the other side of your desk. Then move through the rest of the book, paying particular attention to the chapters headed by notes you give all too often. Maybe it’s time to find a new way to talk about those same old problems. (Peterson and Nicolosi 2015: xiii–xiv)

The rest of the book is structured by a wide-ranging series of what Peterson and Nicolosi have identified as typical script notes, a structural device that serves to break

down the stages of revising a script. Throughout they reiterate the need for resilience, for example: ‘A writer who is determined to make a notes session part of his [*sic*] ongoing professional development rarely falls prey to the emotional and psychological pitfalls therein’ (2015: 6). In the fourth edition of their book, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush do not discuss script development per se, but their chapter ‘Rewriting’ contains the section ‘Taking Suggestions’, which speaks to the process of giving/taking notes:

In most cases, it is very difficult for an untrained reader (and even a trained reader won’t know the script the way you do) to take into account the implications of making a change. Instead of taking your critics’ suggestion at face value, try to use them to figure out exactly what isn’t working. (2007: 346)

In this way, the writer is at the centre of the development process.

Bloore’s book, particularly the chapter on ‘The script meeting: Listening and feeding back’ (2012: 176–99), provides a more comprehensive and perhaps the most deeply examined overview of the script development process – from both ‘sides of the desk’ – and offers guidelines (drawn from case studies) on giving notes. The chapter begins with this observation from television producer Tony Garnett: ‘[Note giving] must be specific and concrete. “Make it funnier” will not do. Nor will half understood jargon from a weekend screenwriters’ course’ (cited in Bloore 2012: 176). Schock is similarly suspicious of what we might call the ‘unregulated’ process of giving notes:

**Pages and pages of notes do not help the writer, usually.** Development people are often required to write lengthy critiques of screenplays to justify their jobs to their employers. In my opinion, a few written notes to articulate a point of view are fine, but I believe in general that writers hate long sets of notes and do not refer to them when making their revisions. Editing a screenplay is a little like a puzzle – you change something, it throws everything else out of whack. I believe you have to be deeply involved in the process to edit a screenplay, and you get involved through discussion, reflection, and then more discussion. To really know the problems is to sympathize with them; this reflection will bring you closer to being able to help the artist solve the problems. (1995, original emphasis)

Filmmaker and scholar Kathryn Millard is likewise wary, asking: do these kinds of note ‘nudge the screenplay towards more of a production and budgeting document rather than a creative record of a screen idea? An idea in flux and transition: an idea on the way to becoming a film’ (2014: 34). Thus, any examination into what script development is, or might be, involves looking to practices beyond the mainstream.

### **Alternative forms of development**

When considering the language of development, as we did in the previous section, Virginia Pitts’ article, ‘Writing from the body: Kinesthetics and entrainment in collaborative screenplay development’ (2013) might inspire us to add ‘performance’ to the lexicon. Like Kath Dooley’s article, ‘Screenwriting the body in *Fireflies*: An analysis of the devising and writing process’ (2016), Pitts suggests a collaborative form of script development can occur through guided actor improvisations. Marie

Regan, using the deconstruction of artworks as a screenwriting method, likewise promotes a development process that fosters ‘the screenwriter’s connection to expressive form and point of view’ believing her technique ‘can be used to develop screenplays that extend the boundaries of narrative to include experimental, installation and “art” cinema’ (2013: 78).

These approaches do not conform to the previously outlined definitions of script development, tethered as they mostly are to commercial imperatives. Millard believes ‘script development processes shape screenplays into preexisting templates primarily designed to meet the needs of industrial film production’ (2014: 179), and encourages screenwriters to be multimodal in developing scripts, and think more prototypically: ‘Your script can be a map, sketches, photo-texts, a wiki, a list of scenes that form part of a jigsaw, a graphic novel, a video trailer, a short film – whatever works’ (2014: 184). Another challenge to ‘conventional’ script development can be found in filmmaker Margot Nash’s book chapter, ‘Developing the screenplay: Stepping into the unknown’ (2014), which argues for a process that embraces uncertainty and ‘the mysterious and often messy process where ideas need time to ferment’ (2014: 97–98). Nash speaks to the dominant paradigms of script development from a place of personal practice and pedagogy, pointing out that ‘The pressure to follow a market-driven development process has led many aspiring screenwriters to embrace the script rules and structural templates without question, rather than embrace a discovery-driven uncertain process, in search of originality, story and meaning’ (2014: 99). Alex Munt, discussing the process of filmmaker Kriv Stenders, identifies an approach to writing that is ‘a hybrid process that uses images and text, and is distributed across phases of film production’ (2008). This notion – while also contributing to script development strategies that, as Dancyger and Rush

note of what they call ‘personal scriptwriting’, ‘open up story structures [for what] cannot be directly expressed through writing alone’ (2007: 281) – suggests a new question: where does script development begin and end?

### **Where does script development begin and where does it end?**

As Stayci Taylor has pointed out:

[...] depending on the circumstances by which the screenwriter comes to the script (for example, independently; optioned or by commission), and the procedures that follow in bringing the script to the screen (that is to say, how the script might continue to change in the production process), it can be difficult to define where script development begins and ends. (2015b: 5)

In thus considering the question of the *parameters* of script development, we might find ourselves also thinking about authorship: *with whom* does development begin and end? As Macdonald writes,

There are questions about how ideas are developed from initial pitch, and what shapes them. Who makes the decisions about what, at what stage and on what basis? Is authorship important within this process, or not? What determines development, and where is creativity in this? (2013: 81)

Other observations around authorship suggest it might be an issue that runs through all the different stages of script development.

For example, Felicia D. Henderson argues: ‘The human interactions in writers’ rooms are forms of collective authorship because the sociological dynamics there heavily influence the narrative that finds its way to the page, and eventually to the screen’ (cited in Caldwell 2009: 227). This is a notion that Henderson calls ‘situational ownership’ (cited in Caldwell 2009: 225). Conor also addresses the issue of ‘multiple ownership’, pointing out that it

[...] has for some time, worked to foreclose the possibilities for larger-scale collegiality or collective resistance for screenwriters. It is the root-cause of many a professional horror story which again signals the normativity of bad work practices for writers past and present. (2013: 10)

This becomes especially relevant in the context of the (predominantly United States) culture of rewrites and co-credits, where authorship becomes complicated, contested and often concealed (see also Banks 2015). This suggests that in some contexts script development has less of a beginning and an end, and is rather more a continuous loop in which particular creative inputs can gain or lose control over time.

Looking at guidelines for screenplay development funding, such as those for federal/national and state/regional broadcasters and screen agencies, might suggest that script development begins *before* the period of remunerated development being sought by the applicant, given the documents (often including a full draft) that must be supplied. This is not to suggest that preparation for such applications should not be expected; rather, it invites us to consider the abstract notion of development in terms of its start and end points – what it entails to say that it has begun/ended – which

might be thought about alongside McAulay's (2014) perspective which, as noted, challenges assumed notions of developmental linearity.

The how-to market, especially texts specific to television, suggests more fixed notions of where script development begins and ends. Douglas, for example, provides a chart in her book that suggests development starts with creating a proposal and ends with the hiatus, bridged by eleven steps in between (2005: 32–33). Yet there is much in the review of literature conducted so far to suggest there is no fixed end point to script development. Aronson's guidance to producers in television, for example, includes a two-page checklist of how to address script problems 'when the series is in production' (2000: 44–45). This suggests, as might be expected, that for a long-running drama series script development is continuous.

Another question we might explore when teasing out the beginning and end points of development is, whether (as suggested by Macdonald above) it evolves *from* the 'pitch' (in simple terms, the short verbal or written summary that sells the idea), or whether the 'pitch' *is* the first stage of development. According to Julian Friedmann, author of *How To Make Money Scriptwriting* the 'succinct pitch' includes minimum details such as what it is about, what sort of story it is, and what type of audience it will appeal to (2000: 50–56). The requirements of the pitch might in fact be considered a highly concentrated form of what is required by/from script development itself. In this way, the pitch might be conceived of as a starting point for development or as a result of the process of script development.

Another projected starting point might include the 'premise', from which Steve Kaplan claims 'All action flows honestly and organically' (2013: 222). This relates back to Batty's (2013) notion of theme functioning as a core from which a script development team can collaborate. There is also the notion of script



development continuing through production, in processes such as actor improvisation, and is discussed by Hollywood filmmaker and director Judd Apatow when he reveals his idea of a good scene being ‘a clean setup for people who are hilarious [...] to riff on’ (2007: x). Similarly, writer/director Catherine Breillat, interviewed in Marsha McCreadie’s *Women Screenwriters Today: Their Lives and Words*, insists

When you write a script, it’s possible to project yourself onto one character.

Whereas when you direct, characters take on a role by themselves. And when you’re on the set as a director, it’s important to be open, to reinvent. (2006: 135)

Finally, Macdonald cites Claudia Sternberg who suggests that there are three stages of the screenplay: a ‘property’ stage before decision making; a ‘blueprint’ stage where significant development is made; and a ‘reading material’ stage when the script is released to a public readership. He argues that the screen idea has conventionally been developed through four phases: the proposal (oral or synoptic document); development (blueprint phase); realization (concrete rather than conceptual, where ‘scripting’ continues through production); and re-presentation (the text becomes a literary document beyond the screenwork). Macdonald asserts that a screen idea does not stop developing after the second phase; rather, ‘scripting’ continues throughout the production. Essentially, the screen idea does not rely on the textual form or documentation in a traditional sense (Macdonald 2013: 74–76). From this analysis, we might understand that the term ‘script development’ covers any contribution made to the script or screen idea, in pre-production and during principal photography.

### **Agencies, services and the ‘how-to’ market**

We have already discussed contributions to the language and experience of script development as arising from the ‘how-to’ market of commercial screenwriting guides, and it is useful to consider academic analysis of that very market, to give perspectives on what the advice being offered might be doing for the industry, individuals, creativity and so on. For example, Conor’s article, ‘Gurus and Oscar winners: How-to screenwriting manuals in the new cultural economy’ (2014), argues that how-to manuals have contributed to a standardization of screenwriting practice. Nash worries that ‘How-to books inevitably become the grail for aspiring screenwriters, yet those who dutifully follow the rules all too often produce formulaic screenplays that fail to ignite the imagination’ (2014: 97). Likewise, an interview with filmmaker Agnieszka Holland challenges the dominant US model of what a good screenplay should look/read like:

From the storytelling point of view, American movies are very similar. Very few movies have different rhythms, or a different aesthetic or different way to tell the story, which means the people are used to only one kind of storytelling. (cited in Seger 1996: 273)

Writing about independent American cinema, J. J. Murphy offers the thought that a screenwriting model broad enough to encompass it ‘would have to be a circular shape rather than [Robert] McKee’s triangular one. A circular shape implies that the spectrum of screenwriting possibilities represents a non-hierarchical continuum. The active, goal-driven protagonist represents only one of several possible options’ (2007:

257). This has resonance beyond the United States, with Australian critic and scholar Adrian Martin contending:

In Australia, the curse of the scriptwriting manual has had clearly deleterious effects on the state of filmmaking itself [...] This leads to movies empty of dramatic ambiguity, where every deep, psychological motivation is spelt out verbally, and the final resolution of the ‘central conflict’ is foreseeable five minutes in. (1999: 25)

With their claim to commercial viability, it is useful to see if the sentiments of such manuals are also to be found in the policies and guidelines of industry organizations who provide funding for script development (which might also contribute to questions about where people go for script development, as we discuss shortly). An initial exploration of such policies and guidelines a few years ago revealed that what they appeared to have in common is an *assumed*, shared understanding of what script development is. That is to say, the expectations of script development *processes* were not necessarily outlined, whereas the expectations of *outcomes* usually were.

As an example, a document from New Zealand government funding agency NZ On Air from 2014 is interesting in its brevity – the entirety of the guidelines are as follows:

*What is development funding?* Development funding helps programme makers explore a programme idea, for example, develop a script. It is primarily allocated to high-cost, one-off drama projects, but can also be used to target a

genre identified as a funding priority, such as comedy series, TV movies and drama series. (2014)

To ‘develop a script’ then is just one example of ways that programme makers might ‘explore a programme’ idea, which potentially opens up the definition/scope of script development. The revised guidelines in 2017 are similarly compact, advising ‘Development funding helps content makers structure a concept; for example to develop treatments and scripts’ (NZ On Air 2017), though it is perhaps what information is required from practitioners submitting a development proposal that indicates the ways in which script development is understood, such as ‘Who are the key development personnel? Producer, researchers, writers, others?’ and ‘What are the deliverable materials: e.g. treatment, scripts, story arcs, character backgrounds, etc.’ (NZ On Air 2017).

A more comprehensive, 6-page document from Screen Australia regarding television development mostly concentrates on eligibility, application processes, funding availability and criteria; but guidelines on the third page might contribute to a better understanding of script development: ‘The program will make available funding to develop an inventive concept into a series bible, series outline, first draft pilot script or first episode script, subject to creative assessment’ (Screen Australia 2014). Newer documents, including the guide to writing synopses and outlines (also available in previous years but updated in 2016) introduce consideration of the ‘core concept’ – ‘a convincing foundation for a feature film, TV series or online and interactive project’ (Screen Australia 2017: 2). They suggest

Whilst writing is an organic and evolving process, unless the ‘core concept’ is known, tested, resolved for the project’s stage of development and dramatically viable, projects are at risk of failing or stagnating in development, particularly from less experienced writers and teams. (Screen Australia 2017: 2)

The snapshot of development currently on Screen Australia’s website (before clicking through links and PDF downloads for more comprehensive application forms and guidelines) reads:

Creative story development involves art, craft and heart. It’s a process that needs to be flexible and responsive, embracing a diversity of tools and approaches that will enrich and focus the creative vision at the heart of a story so audiences will be engaged and entertained across a variety of delivery platforms. We encourage you to design a bespoke approach to development that will keep the project’s momentum up, its purpose alive and the audience in clear view. (2017)

This is notable in its alignment more with the ‘alternative’ practices of script development previous outlined, with its use of words and phrases like ‘flexible’, ‘responsive’, ‘diversity of tools’ and ‘bespoke approach’. In other words, the ‘how-to’ market may have less in common with the documents disseminated by funding agencies as might be assumed, given the commercial interests at the heart of both sets of literature. While neither area of the discourse brings us any closer to definitive

notions of what script development *is* or *looks like*, the diversity of perspectives are useful prompts for ongoing investigation.

Screenwriting services (consultants, script doctors, gurus and so on) are another source for such an investigation. For example, Script Angel founder Hayley McKenzie and her team in the United Kingdom offer a range of development services, including ‘Script Analysis Report’, ‘Mentoring Packages’, ‘Script Consultations’ and ‘Development Notes’. This introduces questions around the roles played by/of mentoring, notes and consultation, including who gets access to them (cost), why people access them (aspiration), and what takes place within/during them (experience). There are many such development services available internationally, from ‘small scale’, individual practitioners who draw on their experiences as writers, authors and/or teachers; to ‘large-scale’ gurus (e.g. Aronson, Vogler and Robert McKee) and conglomerates (Industrial Scripts, ScriptWorks) who draw on their strong reputations, which is often predicated on a portfolio of international seminars and workshops that are priced accordingly (or as some would argue, prohibitive in cost to many).

Educational institutions and training facilities offering screenwriting courses can also reveal how pedagogical ideas of script development are being conceptualized and disseminated at the instructional level. The most useful (and obvious) of these found to date is a qualification available in the United Kingdom. The National Film and Television School’s Diploma in Script Development is a 16-month part-time course, which has been running since 2003. Claiming its status as ‘the only comprehensive vocational programme in script development in the UK’, the last six months of the course sees students paired with a screenwriter in a ‘supervised development project’ in which they ‘work together through two drafts and two

development meetings’ (National Film and Television School 2015). Interesting for our purposes is the published curriculum, which gives us an indication of the elements that might be considered vital parts of script development, at least in the United Kingdom. These include ‘Script analysis and script report writing’, ‘detailed story development practice’ and, most notably, ‘negotiating development meetings’ and ‘the industrial environment – development in its context’ (National Film and Television School 2015). The use of this word ‘context’ suggests that, at least in terms of this training facility, script development is an industrial, rather than individual, concern.

The description of Linda Aronson’s 2015 Sydney-based course, ‘Script Development for Producers’, likewise offers insights into how the practice of development might be understood, including this question which asks ‘precisely how, as a busy producer or script executive, do you monitor and guide that wonderfully exciting project from the flash of an idea, the patchy treatment, the rough first draft through into a polished script?’ (Australian Film, Television and Radio School 2015), which interestingly positions development as a necessity to ‘improving’ a project (in ways perhaps counter to aforementioned challenges to linear approaches to development).

## **Conclusion**

As this article has revealed, the literature on script development – whether explicit in its focus or implicitly referring to its practice – is wide, varied and multi-faceted; and for our purposes here, arguably fragile and still emerging, in the sense that it does not collectively purport to add incremental, scholarly insights into the practice, and/or does not necessarily refer to other literature. Indeed, this comprehensive overview –

an attempt to define the field – raises more questions than it answers, and in doing so points to the potential for further research. It is on this point that we conclude the article by proposing a series of potential research themes on the topic.

*Why do people look to develop scripts?* What is the assumed value of script development, and why are people willing to invest time, effort and often money in it? This theme, which could be explored through further in-depth empirical research, using forms of ethnography and interviewing, for example, could draw out, illuminate and interrogate the range of possible development scenarios, from the ‘amateur’ end of the market, where people aspire to write good screenplays to the ‘professional’ end of the market, where screen agencies, for example, invest trust in others to ‘make good’ the projects they have committed to. This work could usefully draw on theoretical frameworks from studies of creative and cultural labour, creative industries and creative practice.

*Where do people look to develop scripts?* Not unrelated to the above, where do people turn for advice and guidance about script development, and what might this tell us about its position in wider constellations of industrial media production? Research here might look across the spectrum of offerings, from social media and blogs, to competitions and mentoring schemes, to paid services and gurus, to formal education and industry or government schemes. How consistent are practices across this spectrum, and does money equate to quality (perceived or actual)? Creative industries and production studies might be useful theoretical domains here.

*What is the role of the script expert in development?* Focusing in on one particular aspect, examining the role of the expert (perceived or actual) would be productive and would tell us something about why and where people engage in script development. Are there different values for industry than for individuals, and what



might this signal about the script expert market? Even more rudimentary, creating a database of who people see as script experts, what their credentials are and how they practice, would provide important foundational work for other researchers in the field. It would also be interesting to survey the tools, paradigms and checklists offered by the various script experts, and investigate if and how any of them are being used in industry or by training and funding organizations.

*Does script development depend on media/format?* A comparative study of script development practices across media – film, television, animation, games, web series and so on – would illuminate similarities and differences. It has become a running theme in the literature reviewed that parameters do become mutable when discussing script development in different contexts, and many of our questions can be answered differently depending on the media/format. Knowledge gained from this type of study would be useful to industry, especially in the digital age where formats are expanding and transforming, and where traditional notions of script development may be losing their efficacy.

*Script development and diversity: gender, ethnicity, age, class and sexuality.* Researchers drawing on the theoretical resources of sociology, cultural studies and critical policy perspectives have begun to develop an evidence base focused on asymmetrical ‘access’ to script development, and how broader structural and social inequalities impact upon script development practices and spaces. While much work has been undertaken in these areas from the general standpoint of film, television and other industries (as in the excellent work from Henderson 2011; Jones and Pringle 2005; Warner 2015), in-depth, empirical studies of script development scenarios as gendered and raced, e.g., would be a crucially important contribution to the field. Liz Francke’s book, *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* (1994), is a useful

foundation for a gendered approach, and the recent work of Wreyford (2016) and Taylor (2016) are indicative of the critical and creative possibilities of this work.

*Script development in the academy.* Finally, as universities continue to support practice-based/led Ph.D.s in screenwriting practice, we might consider this to be a form of script development. With a clear research imperative as opposed to, for example, a commercial one, screenplays being developed in the academy, under the supervision of academics, practitioner-academics and/or industry consultants, can arguably always be viewed through the lens of script development given the performative (of research) nature of the work being produced. Taking Batty et al.'s articles 'Thinking through the screenplay: The academy as a site for research-based Script development' (2016) and 'Rewriting, remaking and rediscovering screenwriting practice: When the screenwriter becomes practitioner-researcher' (2015) as a foundation, it would be useful to map screenplays that are being developed in the academy and consider how they might contribute to broader debates about the topic.

These are the themes that have emerged for us during and upon reflection of this study-to-date, which we hope will not only be of interest to other researchers in the field, but that will also instigate further research projects and partnerships across disciplines and fields.

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